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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

AIRGRAM

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HANDLING INDICATOR

LIMDIS

TO : DEPARTMENT OF STATE

INFO : USDEL FRANCE

COPY NO. 1 SERIES A

FROM : Amembassy SAIGON

DATE: March 31, 1971

SUBJECT : PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: What if Big Minh Decides Not to Run?

REF :

Action assigned to

Action Taken

Date of Action 4/1/71

Office Symbol

Action Officer

Name of Officer

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SUMMARY

1. The likelihood of General Duong Van Minh's candidacy in the coming election for president has become more questionable than it was at the beginning of the year. Since Minh is now widely considered as the only potential challenger to President Thieu with a chance to win, a decision on his part not to run, or to withdraw his candidacy after he had announced it, could have the effect of leaving Thieu without a strong opponent in the race. The consequences could vary depending on the circumstances of such a withdrawal. A refusal by Minh to enter, or continue, the contest on the basis of what were accepted as valid charges that Thieu had rigged the election in advance could seriously undermine the development of constitutional government in Viet-Nam and make the task of carrying out general American policy more difficult. But other circumstances are conceivable which would entail less drastic consequences. Other hopefuls might be encouraged to enter the race; but no one else presently in sight, except conceivably Vice President Ky, looks capable of mounting a serious challenge to Thieu. Minh might drop out

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FORM DS-323 4-62

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Clearances:

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as part of a compromise agreement with Thieu which would possibly leave foreigners bewildered, but Vietnamese relatively unconcerned. Thieu has assets with which he could improve the chances of such an outcome.

Introduction.

2. General Duong Van (Big) Minh is presently the leading prospective challenger to President Thieu in the presidential election, and probably the only likely candidate with any chance of beating Thieu. He is currently engaged in sounding out prospective support; however, he has not yet announced his candidacy. Recently, he has expressed doubts as to whether he should run or not and professed concern as to whether President Thieu will actually allow a free election to take place.

3. As the incumbent, President Thieu enjoys considerable inherent advantages and he is generally conceded to have picked up further strength in the past few months. Minh consequently may become convinced that he would have no real chance to win against Thieu. Minh's character and past record indicate that if he believed he was not likely to win, he might simply give up the idea of running instead of mounting an expensive and taxing campaign. The incentive to run against strong odds is in any case small under present political conditions in Viet-Nam.

4. Thus there is a real chance Minh may either not enter the race or withdraw from it at some point after having proclaimed his candidacy. The consequences of such a withdrawal would depend partly on the timing - whether it were still early enough for other candidates to come forward, and, especially, on the actual circumstances, including the reasons cited, e.g. whether Minh withdraws calling for national unity behind Thieu or charging Thieu with fraud.

Withdrawal by Compromise with Thieu.

5. A few months ago General Tran Van Don and others were engaged in efforts to bring Thieu and Minh together with the idea of arranging an agreement to cooperate in the interests of national unity under which Minh would withdraw and possibly accept some position in the government. President Thieu, apparently convinced he can win against Minh in the election, showed no interest. Minh also was uncooperative, and so far these efforts have come to naught. A basic obstacle to a

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compromise between them is that both have been Chief of State, and Minh is senior to Thieu. It would be difficult for Minh to take a position under Thieu, although Chairmanship of the Joint General Staff has been mentioned by Vietnamese observers as possibly acceptable to Minh. It is conceivable that an agreement could be reached between the two involving commitments on personnel or policy that would entail, if not Minh's support, his neutrality. It is not to be ruled out that Minh might unilaterally decide to withdraw for other reasons, such as to avoid a divisive campaign--even without concessions from Thieu.

6. The short-run impact within South Viet-Nam of a withdrawal might not be disastrous; most Vietnamese believe Thieu will win anyway. In the longer run, however, even a friendly withdrawal could represent the loss of an opportunity to strengthen the new democratic institutions, since the average Vietnamese might assume that the constitutional system is good only in fair weather. On the other hand, a potentially disruptive campaign would be avoided, and criticism abroad might be somewhat lessened if Minh were seen to be cooperating with Thieu in the interests of national unity and political stability.

Withdrawal Attacking Thieu.

7. Minh might well withdraw with the public charge that President Thieu had abused his privileges and rigged the election in advance. Both Vietnamese and world opinion would be disposed to take this as one more sign that democracy in SVN was a facade and that the regime was still essentially a military dictatorship. The possibility of violent public protests under these circumstances could not be excluded. The usefulness of the election as a means of affirming representative government and of attracting domestic and international support for the GVN would be largely negated.

Alternate Candidates.

8. An early decision by Minh not to run would put new life into Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky's candidacy. With Minh out of the picture, Ky could enter the lists and not at the same time run the risk of helping a soft-lining candidate to win. Ky evidently has considered Southern leftist Au Truong Thanh as a running mate. Although the pairing would look strange to many (and Thanh reportedly is not interested), a slate consisting of Ky with a vice presidential candidate acceptable to An Quang could attract a number of elements dissatisfied with Thieu. Such a slate might make a respectable showing, but would have little chance of defeating Thieu. A Thieu-Ky competition (particularly if Ky does not

have a prestigious leftist such as Thanh as a running mate) would be subject to disparagement as little more than a fight between generals and hardly a demonstration of democratic processes.

9. Most of the candidates of stature who ran in 1967 have left the political scene in one way or another, and it is too early to estimate who might run other than Ky. If the Lower House and the President do not change the action of the Upper House in eliminating the requirement in the election law for endorsements of candidates (originally 40 deputies and senators or 100 provincial councilmen in the Lower House version), the door will theoretically be open for other hopefuls. Vietnamese at this point talk of almost no one other than Thieu, Minh and Ky, but conceivable minor candidates might include 1967 aspirants Nguyen Dinh Quat and Phan Ba Cam, and Catholic politician Truong Vinh Le. If Minh should not run it is also possible that the vigorous Progressive Nationalist Movement might field a slate headed by Nguyen Van Bong; however, as of now this looks unlikely.

10. It should be noted that a withdrawal by Minh or any other candidate at the last minute would probably leave their names still officially on the ballots. The election bill as it now reads provides that candidates cannot withdraw their candidacies after the final posting of names which is to take place at the latest 40 days before the election on October 3.

The American Role.

11. Seldom does a serious conversation with Vietnamese about the coming election not eventually get around to the alleged position of the US Government. Assurances that the United States has no intention of interfering are accepted politely but do not dissuade Vietnamese fromthe belief that US influence will play a large part in determining the outcome.

12. It seems clear, furthermore, that Vietnamese on the whole today take it for granted that the United States favors the candidacy of President Thieu.

13. The net effect on a candidate's chances of American support is brought into some question by the contention that nationalist sentiment would prefer a clearly "independent" candidate, but under present war time conditions Vietnamese in general assume that American approval is a practical political asset and probably an essential one to win the 1971 presidential election. (Various moderate opposition elements still make approaches to solicit American support--sometimes "secret" support--for their favorite potential candidates.)

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Conclusions.

14. At present reading, the two main prospective figures in the 1971 presidential elections are incumbent President Thieu and possible challenger Big Minh. Vice President Ky is the only other political figure now in sight who could possibly mount a strong campaign.

15. Whatever the circumstances, a withdrawal by Minh from the race would detract from the credibility of the election and leave the constitutional system weakened. However, the consequences would probably be less damaging in Vietnamese eyes than in American.

16. Considerable discredit would be incurred, even in Viet-Nam, if Minh and his supporters were to boycott the election charging Thieu had rigged it in advance. Unmitigated, such a situation would intensify Vietnamese cynicism toward the political system, undercut Thieu's legitimacy and invite plotting against him. The political instability that would probably ensue could represent a serious threat to American policy objectives.

17. On the other hand, many responsible Vietnamese, still unaccustomed to democratic processes, look with a certain uneasiness and distrust toward an open contest for power at the ballot box, especially while the country is at war. Thus a Minh withdrawal effected under decorous circumstances, although possible leaving Thieu virtually unopposed, would probably in the end be accepted in Viet-Nam as a confirmation of Thieu's leadership.

18. The President has some assets which he could use to this end. Many opposition politicians now expected to back Minh concede Thieu's ability and would probably be willing to work with him if he saw fit to offer appropriate incentives to them. A likely winner has a strong attraction in any political environment. Offers of a share in the new administration might be feasible in some instances. Even An Quang might be moved, if not to a position of support, at least toward tacit acceptance of the situation by such a concession as withdrawal of the Buddhist charter from the now crumbling Quoc Tu faction. Minh himself might be susceptible to an appeal, made by Thieu or others, for national unity on patriotic grounds.

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19. On present reading, Ky would probably enter the race against Thieu if Minh were to withdraw (and perhaps even if he doesn't), but it is more difficult to judge how seriously and persistently Ky would exploit his not inconsiderable assets. Ky's position under various contingencies remains one of the significant variables in the election equation.

20. The United States is almost sure to be associated with the election and its outcome. If Minh withdraws, whatever reasons he may choose to cite, many local observers will conclude that he was unable to secure American approval and saw no purpose in pursuing a losing proposition. There is little American representatives can do to dispel these assumptions which are rooted in the popular concept of the present American role in Viet-Nam.

21. In sum, a one-sided election in October would entail serious risks to our endeavors in Viet-Nam, but much could be done by the GVN to mitigate the adverse consequences.

BUNKER